At this moment of reinvigorated U.S. imperialism, it is important to interrogate anew public recollections of the U.S. war in Vietnam—"the war with the difficult memory." As a "controversial, morally questionable and unsuccessful" war, the Vietnam War has the potential to unsettle the master narratives of World War II—in which the United States rescues desperate people from tyrannical governments and reforms them "into free and advanced citizens of the postwar democratic world." It is this "good war" narrative, in which the United States is produced as triumphant and moral, that legitimizes and valorizes U.S. militaristic intervention around the world then and now. This article thus asks: How has U.S. popular culture dealt with the "difficult memory" of the Vietnam War—a war that left the United States as neither victor nor liberator? Having lost the Vietnam War, the United States had no "liberated" country or people to showcase; the Vietnam War thus appears to offer an antidote to the "rescue and liberation" myths and memories. Yet, in the absence of a "liberated" Vietnam and people, the U.S. media appear to have produced a substitute: the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees. Calling attention to the link between the trope of the "good refugee" and the myth of "rescue and liberation," I argue that the media have deployed the refugee figure, the purported grateful beneficiary of U.S.-style freedom, to remake the Vietnam War into a just and successful war. In other words, Vietnamese refugees, whose war sufferings remain unmentionable and unmourned in most U.S. public discussions of Vietnam, have ironically become constituted as the featured evidence of the appropriateness of U.S. actions in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the cost, was ultimately necessary, just, and successful.

Through analyses of U.S. press coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "Fall of Saigon" (hereafter, twenty-fifth anniversary), I identify two
overarching narratives: one that centers on innocent and heroic Vietnam war-
riors, and the other on liberated and successful Vietnamese refugees. In them-
selves, the narratives of noble U.S. veterans and Vietnamese American model
minorities are not new. What is new is my insistence that we juxtapose these
two narratives and that we analyze them in relationship to the cultural legiti-
mation of the Vietnam War. Many American studies scholars have detailed
how the recuperation of Vietnam veterans has been central to the ongoing
renovation of U.S. mythic “innocence.” I add to this discussion by showing
how popular narratives of Vietnamese refugees have also been deployed to “res-
cue” the Vietnam War for Americans. While most scholars have separated
Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese refugees into different fields of study, I show
how they are necessarily joined: as the purported rescuers and rescued respec-
tively, they together reposition the United States and its (white male) citizens
as savior of Vietnam’s “runaways,” and thus as the ultimate victor of the Viet-
am War. I contend that it is this seeming victory—the “we-win-even-when-
we-lose” certainty—that undergirds U.S. remembrance of Vietnam’s “collat-
eral damage” as historically “necessary” for the progress of freedom and
democracy. Equally important, this ability to conjure triumph from defeat
constitutes an organized and strategic forgetting of a war that “went wrong,”
enabling “patriotic” Americans to push military intervention as key in America’s
self-appointed role as liberators. In other words, it is the “we-win-even-when-
we-lose” syndrome that has energized and emboldened the perpetuation of
U.S. militarism. By studying the constructions of the Vietnam veterans and
the Vietnamese refugees together and in relation to continued U.S. militar-
ism, I draw on and bring into conversation three oft-distinct fields: American
studies, refugee/immigration studies, and war/international studies.

About the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

I focus here on the U.S. media commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniver-
sary because of its symbolic significance as a milestone—an occasion for the
retelling, reenacting, and reimagining of the war a quarter of a century later. Beyond its symbolic significance, the twenty-fifth anniversary is noteworthy
because it took place in a moment of full restoration of U.S. world power.
Since World War II, U.S. popular culture has attempted to produce the United
States as the leader of the “free” world, often recasting its history of imperial-
ism and racial exclusion into triumphant stories of Western benevolence and
racial democracy. However, the “Vietnam Syndrome”—the national “malaise”
over the United States’ humiliating defeat in Vietnam, widely understood as a
“We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose”

“profound failure of nerve” and a “weakness of resolve”—disrupted the insistent and ongoing memorialization of World War II triumphs. The Vietnam War was so divisive and exhausting that in its aftermath, Americans of different political convictions forged an uneasy truce that there would be “No More Vietnams.” After the war, the United States decreased the number of its overseas bases, with the sharpest declines in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, from 183 bases in 1975 to 121 in 1988. During the 1980s, in response to the widespread fear of repeating a national mistake, the United States sent combat troops to back up its cold war policy only once—in its 1984 invasion of Grenada. However, this anti-interventionist mood was short-lived. By the end of the 1980s, the U.S. had “won” the cold war, making it the world’s sole military power. Soon after, the media spectacularized the 1991 Persian Gulf War victory as the ending of the Vietnam Syndrome, featuring a gleeful President George Bush declaring, “By God we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.” The 1994 lifting of the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam, which the media narrated as Vietnam “opening up” to the West, constituted an important milestone in U.S.-Vietnam relations. In the next five years, the two countries hammered out a major trade agreement, signed on July 13, 2000, that formalized their ties as trade partners. To summarize, by 2000, the U.S. was perceived to have won the cold war and the Persian Gulf War; and Vietnam (and also China) had begun to “open up” to the West. With these military and economic “successes,” the United States was understood to have left behind the “Vietnam Syndrome” as it confidently reasserted its world power, calling for a “New World Order” under its management.

By the thirtieth anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon,” the U.S. military had metamorphosed into a “global cavalry,” threatening to launch preemptive wars against “rogue states,” “bad guys,” and “evil doers” in the so-called arc of instability, which runs from the Andean region of South America through North Africa, across the Middle East to the Philippines and Indonesia. Since 1990, the size and geographic spread of U.S. military bases had increased greatly. In 2002, the size of the U.S. “military empire” is estimated to be between 750 and 1,000 different bases in almost sixty countries and separate territories, with many of the new bases located in the “arc of instability.” The coverage of the thirtieth anniversary seemed to have shifted accordingly. Although a detailed study of the press treatment of the thirtieth anniversary is beyond the scope of this paper, a comparison of the Los Angeles Times coverage of the twenty-fifth and thirtieth anniversaries suggests that by the thirtieth anniversary there was a popular sense that the United States no longer felt hampered by its loss in Vietnam. In 2000, the Los Angeles Times published twenty-five
articles on the twenty-fifth anniversary (see Table 1), detailing the war’s many “lessons and legacies.” In contrast, in 2005, it printed only four stories on the thirtieth anniversary, none of which scrutinized the impact of the war on U.S. society, culture, and institutions. Tellingly, the two articles on Vietnam’s commemoration of the anniversary stressed the country’s flourishing economy and its “deep ties with the United States.” Less than a week later, the newspaper publicized the pending visit of Vietnam’s Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States—the first such visit by a Vietnamese leader since the war’s end. Juxtaposed against the daily reporting on the “crisis” in Iraq, the comparatively sparse thirtieth anniversary coverage and the focus on Vietnam’s “deep ties” to the United States imply that the United States had by then won the Vietnam War, which could be read as an encouraging sign of what is to come in Iraq. Thus the specificity of the twenty-fifth anniversary: it took place at the height of the U.S. final recovery from the Vietnam Syndrome and the full restoration of its global power. In what follows, I show that the media’s substitution of the “Vietnam Syndrome” with the “we-win-even-when-we-lose” syndrome provides the crucial ideological support for continued U.S. militaristic intervention around the world.

Documenting the Production of War Memories

In my examination of U.S. press coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary, I am interested in understanding cultural memory’s role in naturalizing certain understandings of the past, in interpellating and producing subjects, and in reinforcing specific concepts of the U.S. nation. Cultural memory, as a “field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history,” is one of the primary means by which a nation’s “collective desires, needs, and self-definitions” are revealed. Since memory activities are always mediated by relations of power and accompanied by elements of repression, it is necessary to identify “what is at stake in remembering and forgetting past events in certain ways and not in others.” Scholars have underscored the centrality of the anniversary in the making and unmaking of war memories, as the annual commemoration provides a familiar yet always-fresh terrain to “variously sustain, erase, and transform memories of past events” for present purposes. In the context of historical anniversary, we need to be especially attentive to the “forgetting of forgetfulness,” in this case, to how the process of remembering the Vietnam War as an eventual success entails the forgetting of U.S. military aggression and destructiveness in Vietnam. As Lisa Yoneyama writes, “the ongoing reformulation of knowledge about the nation’s past is a
process of amnes(t)ic remembering whereby the past is tamed through the reinscription of memories.”

In this essay, I focus on mainstream press outlets, rather than on alternative U.S.-based English presses or Vietnamese-language presses, because I am most interested in the widely circulated and therefore dominant remembrances of the Vietnam War, and in how these narratives are linked up to U.S. global designs. Media scholars have long established that mainstream media invariably reinforce prevailing social arrangements because they operate within and reproduce the dominant discursive-ideological frameworks. In my analysis, I pay close attention to the various “textual structures and strategies” by which the media deployed the twenty-fifth anniversary to naturalize U.S. display of political, military, and economic power. The analysis that follows is based on a total of 112 articles (see Table 1). About half came from three major U.S. newspapers: the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. I also included three California newspapers from communities with the highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans: the Orange County Register, the San Diego Union-Tribune, and the San Jose Mercury News; and three from the nation’s leading weeklies, Time magazine and Newsweek. Finally, twelve articles came from various internet sources.

Because 70 percent of the articles covered either the U.S. veterans (30 percent) or the Vietnamese refugees (40 percent), I focus on the comparative and relational depiction of these two groups. It was not inevitable that the media coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary would focus on the veterans and the refugees. At the end of the Vietnam War, both groups were unwanted and even despised by the American public. Ambivalent about the reasons for war,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of articles</th>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Orange County Register</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>San Diego Union-Tribune</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>San Jose Mercury News</td>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Newsweek</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Miscellaneous (from internet sources)</td>
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Total: 112
horrified by reports of war crimes, and humiliated and emasculated by defeat, many Americans shunned the veterans—the visible symbol of America’s failure—upon their return from the battlefront. In no other war were American soldiers so scorned by their fellow Americans. A 1973 Harris poll revealed that the American public ranked the military only above sanitation workers in relative order of respect. In the same way, in May 1975, a Harris poll found that the majority of Americans did not welcome the refugees: more than 50 percent of those polled felt that Southeast Asian refugees should be excluded; only 26 percent favored their entry. The pairing of the Vietnam veterans and the Vietnamese refugees was also not inevitable. As Sturken observes, in most public depictions of the Vietnam War, the Vietnam veteran displaces the Vietnamese as “the central figure for whom the war is mourned.” Because warfare is ultimately a conflict over which warring nation’s cultural construct will prevail, the production of postwar memories often relies on the material reality of the soldier’s dead body to make the nation’s cultural claims “real.” As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, “from the American perspective, the Vietnamese bodies must be dehumanized, de-realized, in order to allow for the humanization of the American soldier and the substantiation of his body and, through it, of American ideology and culture.” Thus the prominence and the pairing of stories on the veterans and refugees in 2000 have to be understood as highly organized and strategic—an attempt to recuperate U.S. status as the world’s mighty yet moral leader.

The Recuperation of the Warriors: The Innocent and Mighty Heroes

The defeat in Vietnam battered U.S. masculinity, signifying, in Melani McAlister’s words, “failure of will, sexual failure, and . . . military failure.” A revitalization of U.S. masculinity thus necessarily involves the recuperation of its veterans’ masculinity. Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz identify the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, erected in 1982, as a watershed: it reconciled the conflicting memories of the divisive war by celebrating the traditional virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and honor of the veteran but without reference to his cause. By 1989 a Harris survey found that Americans ranked the military above big business, organized labor, the medical community, banks, newspapers, Congress, television, newspapers, and even the Supreme Court in trust. A 1990 Gallup poll showed that 69 percent of those surveyed believed that Americans have not treated Vietnam veterans well; this figure climbed to 72 percent in 2000. Already in 1991, the U.S. military appeared “inviolable” in public discussions of the Gulf War. As McAlister reports, even
the most vocal opponents of Desert Storm “found it inappropriate to criticize
the troops or their conduct.” By the year 2000, the press depiction of U.S.
Vietnam veterans seems to be a consolidation of these earlier trends, with the
majority of the articles emphasizing the veterans’ personal sacrifices and their
roles as friends and rescuers of the Vietnamese. Below, I show how this strate-
gic repackaging of U.S. veterans is central to the cultural transformation of
the Vietnam War into a “good war.”

Loss of Innocence

“Loss of innocence” was how many journalists described the U.S. soldiers’
experience in Vietnam: “You were an American boy, whose innocence was lost
here in the war”; the Vietnam War “was about a forced and painful loss of
American innocence”; a CIA agent who helped evacuate South Vietnamese
out of Saigon later “wrote an angry book about his loss of innocence in Viet-
nam”; and a Vietnam War film’s “grim depiction of young Americans’ loss of
innocence stirred raw emotion in audiences in 1978.” Besides depoliticizing
the war and its conduct, this “lost-boys” motif immediately places the United
States and its warriors squarely within the territory of modernity; it is they
who purportedly inhabit the moral domain of innocence. In contrast, Viet-
nam and its people are seen to occupy the other side of universality—a place
where violence is indigenous. This narrative is thus fundamentally about
race, space, and time: American soldiers’ travel to Southeast Asia is figured as
a journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory—from
orderliness to chaos, from innocence to violence. In numerous news accounts,
journalists projected Vietnam, “a tiny tinhorn country halfway around the
world” onto anachronistic space, depicting it as “exotic,” “sensual,” “alien,”
infected with “sweltering, insect-ridden jungles”—a place of “horror,” “mad-
ness,” and “violence,” replete with snipers, drugs, and prostitutes; in short,
“hell.” In a story on the death of U.S. serviceman Darwin Judge, reporter
Elsa Arnett established the discursive distance between the two countries by
describing Judge’s hometown as a place where residents baked cherry pies,
tended vegetable gardens, lived in cozy ranch houses, and lazed at “a quiet
park with a butterfly garden bordered by rolling soybean fields”; in contrast,
Arnett depicted Vietnam as a “steamy, mysterious jungle” ten thousand miles
away—a place where innocent boys, “raised on snow cones, Little League, and
Eagle Scouts” were sent only to return home “in polished steel coffins.”

A standard representation of U.S. warriors stressed the soldiers’ innocence
by locating them in the private sphere of family, emotions, and domesticity. In
a generative analysis of U.S. media representation of the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1980), Melani McAlister argues that the location of the hostages in the world of “private life” is “the guarantee of ‘innocence’”; it is what constitutes the hostages as virtuous victims, “allied with family, emotions, and domesticity, rather than diplomacy, officialdom, or politics.”42 The focus on emotion is most evident in news stories on the Vietnam War Memorial (and its replicas), with reporters itemizing and sentimentalizing the personal artifacts left at the wall(s) by the dead’s loved ones: a handwritten note from a little sister, a “black paper flower attached to a snapshot of a young man,” a high school yearbook, a “wallet-sized hospital photograph of a newborn girl,” a marriage license, a set of plastic toy soldiers, an aunt’s poem that implores “What would Jimmy do? What would Jimmy be?”43 These sentimentalized stories invite the reader to mourn the innocent (American) dead alongside their loved ones, and in so doing to become a member of the family nation. By consistently representing the veterans as private individuals identified by their relationship to “home,” and not as “official Americans” identified by their positions in the U.S. military, the media effectively foreclose any critical discussion of the actions in, reasons for, and ongoing consequences of the war.

A prominent example of the privatization of the Vietnam War is the story of William Benedict Nolde, the last official U.S. casualty of the Vietnam War, killed just eleven hours before the cease-fire took effect.44 An ambitious “fast-rising Army lieutenant colonel,” Nolde had returned to Vietnam for a second tour with hopes of getting his first general’s star. Reporter Elizabeth Jensen introduced the reader to Nolde as a loving husband, doting father, popular teacher, loyal friend, and active member in the Lions Club and Scouting. We learned that Nolde’s first son, Blaire, was only ten days old when Nolde left for Korea; that his daughter Kimberly “totally lost it” the day she learned of his death; that his wife never wanted to remarry because “[she] had the best”; and that his son Bart “has built his life around his father’s last words to him.” A 1966 family photo showed a beaming Nolde flanked by his family—all smiles and in their Sunday best. In contrast, this was all we glimpsed of Nolde’s duties in Vietnam: “Nolde visited orphans and refugees in An Loc, the South Vietnamese village where he died, and worked with a local priest on rebuilding efforts.” This brief glance of Nolde’s Vietnam tour presented Nolde as a model American who “was in the Army to spread good.” By consistently identifying Nolde in relation to his family, his friends, and his hometown, rather than by his position and duties as a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, reporter Jensen repeats the common practice of honoring the war dead but without reference to his cause, thereby recasting the story of the “last man down” as
one about human tragedy and suffering rather than about war and international politics.

Although a significant number of those killed in Vietnam were working-class and poor infantrymen, many of them men of color, in the press coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary, Nolde, a white male career officer, and others like him came to represent the virtuous warrior tragically killed while “spread[ing] good.” Nolde’s ideal(ized) family further reinforced an ideology of the white heterosexual family as fundamentally committed to the well-being of nonwhite families around the globe. The media’s hyperinvestment in figures such as Nolde bespeaks the ongoing need to reinscribe American manhood and exposes the centrality of white heterosexual masculinity to national meaning.

In the last fifty years, the cumulative effects of anticolonial struggles and emancipation, feminism and women’s political activism, and ethnic and racial power movements have challenged the dominant narratives of U.S. global power and opened up new possibilities for “critical remembering.” Thus the proliferation of narratives on white manhood, recuperated to represent “the Just, the Legal, and the Good,” works to uphold the dual image of U.S. innocence and potency, both of which undergird the current “War on Terrorism.”

Friends and Rescuers

Cast in the mainstream media as “innocent” and “benevolent,” the United States and its warriors are positioned as friends and rescuers who are committed to ensuring the well-being of nonwhites around the world. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, the U.S. war in Vietnam is renarrated as a noble and moral mission in defense of freedom and democracy, rather than as an attempt to secure U.S. geopolitical hegemony in Southeast Asia, and by extension, in Asia. Thus in numerous news accounts, we read that U.S. soldiers “went [to Vietnam] to fight for freedom”; that “America entered Vietnam with noble intentions—to stanch the spread of communism”; that “U.S. armed forces had performed heroically”; and that Americans need to honor the “selfless contributions” of soldiers “who died attempting to preserve freedom in a faraway country.”

Convinced that they were there to “save” the Vietnamese, some veterans still flinched at what they perceived to be Vietnamese ingratitude toward Americans: “The Vietnamese didn’t see us as liberators . . . And I’d think, ‘Excuse me. I’ve just come 10,000 miles to save you from communism. So what’s with this attitude you’ve got?’”

News reporters even managed to turn U.S. defeat—the fall of Saigon—into a feat of heroism by extolling U.S. last-ditch efforts to evacuate Ameri-
cans and Vietnamese allies out of Saigon in late April 1975. A Washington Post story recorded this glowing assessment from a veteran pilot: “Never in the annals of flying, and I am including all U.S. combat air operations of any war, have a group of pilots performed as magnificently as the helicopter pilots who extracted these folks out of Saigon.”52 Whereas the American pilots were “superb” and “magnificent,” willingly risking their lives “to save more people,” the South Vietnamese were “desperate” and “frantic,” wailing with pain, grief, and terror at the prospect of being left behind.53 Some Marine pilots were reported to be “full of pride” for having snatched “8,000 lives out of the jaws of the dragon in a matter of 20 hours”; others lived with guilt for years for having abandoned the “masses we had come to save so many years earlier.”54 In either case, news reporters repositioned the U.S. military as a valiant rescuer of fleeing Vietnamese, all the while ignoring the military’s role in bringing about this last-ditch evacuation and the ensuing “refugee crisis” in the first place.

News accounts of the postwar period emphasized reconciliation, depicting American veterans as friends of Vietnam and its people. Several news stories stressed the refugees’ gratitude to the United States for “sacrificing 58,000 Americans . . . in South Vietnam” and for “help[ing] Vietnamese refugees resettle in the United States.”55 The theme of friendship also framed stories about Vietnam’s attitude toward the United States: “We are ready to move on, to be friends with America”; “Vietnam has forgotten about the war, adoring Americans, ‘You say you’re American and they clasp you to their bosom.’”56 Consistently, reporters represented Vietnam as a nation in crisis, imploring its former enemy to “inject much-needed foreign currency into the economy.”57 In one story, American veterans returned to Saigon to build low-income housing units because they “want[ed] to do some good for the people who our country sent us over there to help 30 years ago.”58 Reporters even turned a story on Agent Orange into a story about U.S. riches and magnanimity, concluding that unlike the United States, Vietnam “[does] not have money to do more” for its afflicted veterans and thus “ultimately . . . depends on American help” to care for its own people.59

These nested narratives, of the United States as a nation of innocents and do-gooders, mobilize beliefs in the fundamental decency of Americans and in their ability to promote democracy and freedom worldwide, while directing attention away from the geopolitical, military, and economic causes and the ongoing devastation of the Vietnam War for the majority of Vietnamese people. Certainly, this “good war” narrative is not new; these stories draw their power in part by referencing the mythologized Second World War, whose fiftieth anniversary in 1995 occasioned a flurry of widely reported commemoratives
and the outpouring of new books, television specials, and big-budget movies inspired by nostalgia for what has been dubbed “the last good war.”\textsuperscript{60} What is new, however, is the fact that by 2000, reporters were able to reinspect the Vietnam War, the war with the “difficult memory,” within this master narrative of World War II. This masculinist “America-wins-even-when-it-loses” rhetoric is evident in commentator Stanley Karnow’s slant on the war’s legacy: “The fall of Saigon was a debacle but it wasn’t a disaster . . . Since then, America has become probably the most popular country in the world . . . It’s almost chic to be an American in many places”—a claim that has become more dubious in the post-9/11 context. Other writers were blunter: the paradox of Vietnam is that “the loser has returned to instruct the winner. A quarter of a century after the end of the war, mostly everyone wants the same thing: American-style prosperity”; and, “an impoverished nation with a shrunken army, Vietnam needs the access Washington could give it to the modern training and equipment that would put it on an equal footing with its more prosperous neighbors in Southeast Asia.”\textsuperscript{61} As proof of America’s eternal appeal, and thus ultimate victory over Vietnam, commentator Richard Cohen cited the mass exodus of Vietnam’s people for America: “Their children want to learn English, live in the States, surf the Web. Even the son of a war hero has left the country” for the United States.\textsuperscript{62} This reductive version of history—that Vietnamese communists create refugees while Americans save them—reflects the “willed forgetfulness of the American imaginary” that attempts to naturalize the great disparity in level of development between Vietnam and the United States.\textsuperscript{63} Given the ideological importance of Vietnamese “runaways” in the construction of a benevolent and victorious United States, I turn my attention next to the 2000 representation of Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

**Vietnamese Refugees: The Anticommunist Model Minorities**

Thus far, I have shown that the making of “good war” narratives requires the production of “good warriors”: the triumphant do-gooders. But to be truly effective, the “rescue and liberation” narrative also needs the figure of the rescued. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, the majority of the articles on the refugees focus on their rags-to-riches accomplishments, and on their “fanatical” anticommunist stance. Juxtaposed against the recuperated Vietnam veterans, the freed and indebted Vietnamese refugees remake the case for the appropriateness of U.S. war in Vietnam. In many ways, these refugee narratives resemble those told about other racialized immigrants and refugees to the United States: both groups are regularly cast as exiles from the indigenous space of
unfreedom, violence, backwardness, and nonindividuality—all of which help to authenticate the United States as the site of freedom, modernity, and progress. At the same time, I believe, the “good refugee” narrative does something else: it enables the United States to chart a lineage of war triumphs directly from the middle to the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, in a 2003 speech promoting the U.S. occupation of Iraq, President Bush seamlessly inserted Vietnam into his list of “rescue and liberation” missions: “In the trenches of World War I, through a two-front war in the 1940s, the difficult battles of Korea and Vietnam, and in missions of rescue and liberation on nearly every continent, Americans have amply displayed our willingness to sacrifice for liberty.”

It is important to note that Vietnamese Americans themselves have participated in the making of the “good refugee” narrative in U.S. mainstream presses. Most concretely, Vietnamese American reporters penned approximately 20 percent of the 112 articles on the twenty-fifth anniversary, most of which portrayed Vietnamese refugees as successful, assimilated, and anticommunist newcomers to the American “melting pot.” Undoubtedly, the reporters’ perceived Vietnamese-ness enhanced the “authenticity” of these stories. Vietnamese Americans also contributed first-person accounts and interview materials that buttressed the media’s cultural legitimation of the Vietnam War. As an example, the Orange County Register featured Vietnamese community contributors who regularly intoned that “the United States is a free country where freedom is not forgotten. Vietnam is a communist country where freedom is forgotten.” Given the innumerable losses suffered by Vietnamese in the diaspora, and the ongoing erasure of South Vietnamese accounts of the war, not only in the United States but also in Vietnam, the refugees’ public denouncement of the current government of Vietnam is understandable, even expected—a necessary retelling of their history, lest it be further forgotten by the American public and/or the next generation of Vietnamese Americans.

As Vietnam studies scholar Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong observes, “Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us.” At the same time, we need to recognize that this “anticommunist” stance is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary political language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of U.S. rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the U.S. social and political landscape. However, by reducing the multifaceted histories of the Vietnam War and of their lives into a single story about communist persecution, Vietnamese Americans unwittingly allow themselves “to be used in justifications of empire by those who claim to have fought for [their] freedom.”
“We’re Very, Very Happy. We Love America”: Liberated and Grateful Refugees

The refugee success story is deceptively simple. Its bare structure—flight, adjustment, and assimilation—is evident in this typical sample: “Over the years, desperate to flee communism, 1 million refugees have streamed into America . . . Most, after a period of adjustment, have been succeeding in business and a wide range of professions, while their children assimilate at a dizzying pace.” Like other “rescue” narratives, most refugee stories inevitably follow the common formula of the “before” and “after” photographs—a staple since Victorian times to visually depict the oft-complete transformation of the socially stigmatized (the “before”) into the socially recognized (the “after”) primarily due to white benevolent intervention. As Laura Wexler reminds us, although the socially stigmatized—in this case, the refugees—are the subjects of the photos, they do not play the leading roles; instead, they constitute the human scenery deployed to confirm the superiority of a white American middle-class way of life and the righteousness of “rescuing” projects.

Most refugee stories discursively feature a “before” (shot) of the refugees languishing in backward and destitute Vietnam, and an “after” (shot) of them flourishing in cosmopolitan and affluent United States. Often, the description of the “before” draws upon established and naturalized notions of Third World poverty, hunger, or need, with the soon-to-be-rescued Vietnamese living in decidedly premodern conditions, and the “after” relying on accepted knowledge of U.S. democracy and freedom, with the now-assimilated refugees touting access to private property and economic mobility. An example from a story titled “The Boat People”:

Before: Born in 1976, Tran grew up in rural villages off the coast in the south, living in thatched huts. While she romped barefoot in mud puddles and made bracelets from palm leaves, her parents were trying to find ways to get to the United States.

After: She thrived in her new world. After only two years in a Sunnyvale elementary school, she was earning straight A’s. She chose the University of California-Berkeley over Yale so she could be close to her parents. Married last year, she is now director of marketing at a local San Jose company. She weaves her shiny black Mercedes through traffic.

The transformation brought about by life in the United States is unmistakable: from the “thatched huts” of her rural village, Tran has transformed into a successful professional woman, with a black Mercedes to boot. Lest the reader miss Tran’s “makeover” depicted by the “before” and “after” (shots), reporter Arnett deployed another trope: the “would-have-been”—a postulation of how
different the refugees’ life and life chances would have been had they stayed in Vietnam:

*Would-Have-Been:* If they stayed in Vietnam, they knew, their daughter’s life would not be much different from their own. At 8, Tran had never stepped inside a school. She didn’t know how to read. She didn’t even know how to add two plus two. In America, . . . things would be better.77

In many ways, the “would-have-beens” are the most powerful in communicating the allures of the United States because they assume the form of a testimonial—a looking back from individuals who have tasted life on the “other side.” They are powerful because they make the case that *this* life—of education, opportunities, and social mobility—would be unimaginable in Vietnam, and thus could be had only *here* in the United States. Most often, these “would-have-beens” are mere speculation, as in the following statement attributed to a Vietnamese man who “owns a $419,000 home and a metal-coating business, and drives a Mercedes-Benz”: “If I were still in Vietnam, I wouldn’t have the business . . . My children would not have succeeded. They would be working in the rice paddies.”78 This statement is mere speculation because, of course, there could be no tangible evidence of what his life would have been like had he stayed. The fact that these uncorroborated statements graced so many of the refugee stories testifies to the journalists’ confidence in the readers’ ability to fill in the “evidence” with their learned cultural knowledge about the United States and Vietnam.

On rare occasions, the “would-have-been” stories are fleshed out with lurid “evidence” of life in Vietnam. In a four-page spread in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, reporters Scott Gold and Mai Tran tracked the divergent lives of a divided family, juxtaposing the comfortable lifestyle of the father, mother, and three younger children in the United States against the squalid existence of the two older children left behind in Vietnam.79 Five years into their new lives in the United States, the Trans were reportedly “now nestled in Southern California suburbia,” their life “a mosaic of frozen pizzas, skateboards and well-kept lawns.” Against this image of orderliness and abundance, the reporters stressed the “hand-to-mouth lives” of those “left behind”: “They have never ridden in an airplane, stayed in a hotel or eaten chocolate. They do not have a car or TV”; “the family’s address is Alley 116, and the home is a mishmash of corrugated tin and plywood . . . The home’s shower doubles as the dishwasher, but at least the family has running water and electricity, unlike many in Vietnam”; and “the older children left behind make about a dollar a day. At times, they cannot afford salt, much less meat . . . His tiny 5-year-old daughter has a
persistent cough. Her front teeth are black, and no one is sure why.” The
reporters also projected that divergent lives begot divergent futures by con-
trasting the bright prospect of the American-raised teenager who “wants to be
a pediatrician” to the already-doomed future of the granddaughter in Viet-
nam who “probably won’t finish middle school.”

In the following segment, the article’s “would-have-been” trope is unam-
biguous:

Contrasting Routines: Daughter Be Ba Tran . . . can earn 50 cents a day by doing other
families’ laundry. The plank she walks on behind her home serves as a bridge over a polluted
creek. Children sometimes play there, and the fat rats don’t bother to scurry out of the way
when people pass by. On the other side of the world, her sister, Kieu Tien Tran, 17, returns
to her parents’ modest two-bedroom apartment in Stanton with a load of family laundry.

The message is clear: but for the opportunity provided by being “on the other
side of the world,” Kieu Tien Tran’s life would have been as miserable as that of
Be Ba Tran; she would have had to do other families’ laundry instead of her
own, walking over “polluted creek[s]” instead of “well-kept lawns.” The appe-
al of the United States was reported to be so self-evident that when faced
with the choice of staying in Vietnam or leaving behind a daughter and son
(who could not emigrate with their parents because they were already mar-
rried), the family “decided to separate in the hope that at least one faction
would find freedom, if not happiness.” Whereas many Vietnam War stories
invite the reader to mourn the war-induced separation of American families,
this story prods the reader to mourn not the separation of the Vietnamese
family, but the misfortune of those who were forced to stay behind—and even
to celebrate this family separation, for it is only in leaving Vietnam that the
Trans could partake in modern life. Indeed, the pain of being forced to live in
Vietnam, the other side of modernity, was so devastating that the older son
reportedly would rage against his wife, “If it weren’t for you, I’d be gone!” This
ahistorical juxtaposition of life in Vietnam and in the United States natural-
izes the great economic disparity between the two countries, depicting the
two economies as unconnected rather than mutually constituted.

The overrepresentation of “rags-to-riches” refugee stories is misleading since
the economic status of many Vietnamese Americans is characterized by un-
stable, minimum-wage employment, welfare dependency, and participation
in the informal economy.80 To be sure, some news reports feature both suc-
cessful and unsuccessful refugees. In “Three Roads from Vietnam,” reporters
Philip Pan and Phuong Ly tracked the lives of three friends who were fellow
military academy graduates and officers in the South Vietnamese Air Force:
Xuan Pham, Hai Van Chu, and Giau Nguyen. Once peers, their lives in the United States have diverged considerably, with Pham now a prosperous research engineer, Chu a comfortable computer programmer, and Nguyen a struggling dishwasher. Although the story is purportedly about the men’s divergent lives in the United States, the authors said little about how U.S. conditions have affected the men’s life chances. Instead, the story is about luck: the lucky Pham, who “had the opportunity to escape the country” on the day Saigon fell, and Chu, who left relatively soon after, and the unlucky Nguyen, who endured twenty years in Vietnam before he could “get out.” The reporters attributed the men’s divergent lives solely to their fate on April 30, 1975: “Today, their lives continue to be influenced by what transpired on a single day, by the happenstance that determined who made it out and who didn’t.”

Once again, the point is simple: only by “mak[ing] it out” could Vietnamese partake in the good life. By reducing Vietnamese’s life chances to “circumstances on a single day,” the reporters “skipped over” the long war that preceded that “single day” and discounted the power structures that continue to constrain the life chances of even the “lucky” ones who made it to the United States.

“All I Ever Wanted . . . Was Freedom”: Vietnamese in “the Land of the Free”

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon,” reporters assured American readers that all Vietnamese refugees ever wanted was freedom, and that this freedom could be found only in the United States. This rhetoric of liberation and emancipation, so crucial for U.S. world domination since World War II, was what transformed the Vietnamese from “enemies” to “liberated” (from foes to lovers of freedom), and the United States from “war aggressor” to “freedom protector.” By treating the United States as self-evidently “the Democratic nation par excellence,” reporters (re)deployed a racial lexicon that produced Vietnam as a global region to which freedom is a foreign principle, and the United States as that to which freedom is an indigenous property. For instance, a Los Angeles Times article stated that Vietnamese refugees have a “love and hate relationship” with freedom: while the refugees “treasure the freedoms of their new home” and are “amazed by the freedom they see [here],” they also “have less tolerance for . . . freedom than the average American population” because “they came from a country that didn’t have freedom.”

Constituted as existing on the other side of freedom, Vietnamese could only be incorporated into modern subjecthood as refugees; that is, only when
they reject the purported antidemocratic, anticapitalist, (and thus antifree) communist Vietnam and embrace the “free world.” Otherwise absent in U.S. public discussions on Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees become most visible and intelligible to Americans as anticomunist witnesses, testifying to the communist Vietnamese government’s atrocities and failings. Repeatedly, we read accounts of Vietnamese boycotting Vietnam-produced books, magazines, videos, and television broadcasts, waving American flags while shouting anticomunist slogans, denouncing human rights violations committed by the “corrupt” and “heartless rulers of Vietnam,” and plotting the overthrow of the communist government. In the post–cold war and especially post-9/11 era, the refugees’ reliance on old cold war rhetoric to remember their history alongside that of U.S. nationalist history has become increasingly futile. As an example, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai’s 2005 visit to the United States prompted vigorous protests by Vietnamese Americans, with many carrying signs likening Phan to Saddam Hussein—the face of the current enemy—in the hope of goading Washington into rejecting Hanoi’s overtures for closer U.S.-Vietnam relations. However, except for a few obligatory remarks regarding Vietnam’s human rights violations, Bush basically rejected the protesters’ efforts to link Vietnam and Iraq, and communism and terrorism, stating instead that the two nations would work together in the “global fight on terrorism.”

Most often, news reporters deploy the anticomunist trope to valorize capitalism, equating “freedom” with economic access and choice, upward social mobility, and free enterprise. As Representative Dana Rohrabacher of California opined in a press release on the twenty-fifth anniversary, “the compelling difference between [Vietnamese American] success and the poverty and under-development in their homeland is democracy and freedom.” By many news accounts, Vietnamese refugees who “arrived in the United States with little more than the shirts on their back” are “living the American dream, a dream unimaginable 25 years ago.” This narrative of opportunities bolsters the myth of “private property as fundamental to human development” and promotes “freemarket/capitalist and procedural notions” of freedom, citizenship, and democracy, rather than the more radicalized social transformations. As John Fiske suggests, a standard way of marking the difference between capitalist and communist societies is through the language of commodities. According to this capitalist myth, consumer choice promotes individual “freedom,” enabling individuals to have control over their social relations and their points of entry into the social order. This narrative is evident in commentator Karnow’s glowing assessment of post-Vietnam United States: the United
States has emerged from the war “as the world’s sole superpower, inspiring people everywhere to clamor for free enterprise, consumer products, the unbridled flow of information and, above all, a greater measure of democracy.”

It is this collapsing of capitalism into freedom and democracy that discursively distances “the free world” from “communism” and more recently from “terrorism”; and it is this alleged distance that justifies continued militaristic intervention in the service of defending and bestowing freedom. It is no wonder that President Bush regularly evokes past war “successes” and the rhetoric of freedom to sanctify U.S. military conduct in the Middle East: “The United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results.”

Vietnamese refugees are also pivotal to the U.S. construction of itself as multiculturalist, pluralist, and open-minded. Since World War II, and the subsequent civil rights, ethnic identity, and racial liberation movements, U.S. authority both at home and abroad had rested precisely on the official disavowal of racism and the promise of equality among multiple cultures. Accordingly, media representations of the Vietnam War promoted the theme of “military multiculturalism,” depicting the war as a redeeming site where U.S. race relations were transcended—where, at a time of increasing racial tensions in the home front, soldiers of all colors embraced each other as equals in the battlefront. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, reporters heralded the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees as yet another sign of the nation as racially tolerant, inhabited by a population free to insist on and delight in its own diversity. In an article titled “The Melting Pot Is Seasoned Anew,” reporter Don Sevrens informed readers that the Vietnamese arrival, depoliticized as yet another “new wave of immigration,” has “brought peoples, cultures, and religions previously only lightly sprinkled into the melting pot called America.” He further praised the group’s “success” as proof that “the melting pot is clearly at work, with the passing of time, the passing of generations.” Since September 11, the Bush government had expanded its narrative of multiculturalism to include religious diversity, even while initiating “an unrelenting, multivalent assault on the bodies, psyches, and rights” of “Muslim-looking” individuals.

The vision of a pluralist American society is also gendered, formulated around a discourse of consensual heterosexuality and marriage in which women can freely choose their partner, regardless of race. In an article on Vietnamese American Janet Lightfoot, who left Vietnam as a baby in 1975, reporter Leahy described Lightfoot as being “in love with the concept of mixed breed, thinking how exotically American it sounds.” Lightfoot, who was married to a
“German, Irish, black, Cherokee, but ‘light skinned’” man and expecting her first baby, gushed over her American multiracial family, “I’m having an American baby—a mixed breed baby . . . That’s interesting to me . . . Life here is so different than what it might have been.” In this account, the United States became “a country where anything seems possible . . . even the most unlikely romantic pairings,” and Vietnam a place where one is born into families “whose ethnicity had been an unbroken chain for feudal centuries.” Since Vietnam and its people were represented as untouched by time, having changed little “for feudal centuries,” Janet’s freedom to “discover” herself, to choose her own husband, and to carry “the new face of America in her belly” could be realizable only in the United States. This gendered narrative of multicultural inclusion is unmistakable in the story’s summation: “Twenty-five years after Vietnam, Janet’s story is the oldest of American tales, in a society increasingly filled with mixed breeds.” This production of the U.S. nation as a multicultural family is not only about domestic racial politics, meant to ease racial tensions at home; it is also about U.S. international politics, meant to promote the moral authority of U.S. leadership on the world stage. That is, the narrative of a Vietnamese woman’s freedom to have a mixed-race baby in the United States is simultaneously a narrative about the appropriateness of U.S. global reach: U.S. hegemony in the world is proper and just precisely because a liberal multicultural America is morally superior to the putatively more stifling and repressive “regimes” of the “unfree” regions of the world.

**Conclusion**

This article originates from my concern that twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon, a “determined incomprehension” remained the dominant U.S. public stance on the history of the Vietnam War.99 Instead of using the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary to critically analyze and assess the political reasons for and ongoing consequences of the war, U.S. print media have opted to present a personalist, ahistorical, and ultimately “we-win-even-when-we-lose” account of the war and its aftermath. Privileging personal stories of suffering, tragedy, and success, this approach naturalizes Vietnam’s neediness and America’s riches and produces a powerful narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s “runaways” that erases the role that U.S. interventionist foreign policy and war played in inducing this forced migration in the first place. As adoptees of the “world’s sole superpower,” Vietnamese refugees reportedly gained much more than they ever lost from the war, suggesting that the United States had to take everything away from the Vietnamese in
order to “give them everything.” Yoneyama has argued that it is this “we-need-to-destroy-it-in-order-to-save-it” mentality that allows the nation “to anticipate and explain that the enemy can be freed and reformed through U.S. military interventions”—a common refrain in the current war in Iraq. If, as Sturken suggests, “the way a nation remembers a war and constructs its history is directly related to how that nation further propagates war,” then this selective retelling of the Vietnam War builds support for and emboldens U.S. military interventionism in the world. Although routinely “forgotten” in most U.S. public discussions of the Vietnam War, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Vietnamese refugees became the featured evidence of the appropriateness and even necessity of U.S. world hegemony. The refugees—constructed as successful and anticommunist—recuperated the veterans’ and thus U.S. failure of masculinity and remade the case for U.S. war in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the costs, was ultimately necessary, moral, and successful. Together, the themes of rescue, anticommunism, freedom, and multiculturalism present the United States as having a right and even an obligation to consolidate its political, military, and economic power—that is, a right to hegemony—in all parts of the world that are deemed “enemies to freedom.”

Notes
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5. The “Fall of Saigon” is a U.S.-specific term that denotes a contained singular event and that refuses to acknowledge either the before or after of that day. Vietnamese have other names for this day: “ngày giải phóng” (Liberation Day) for Vietnamese in Vietnam, and “ngày quốc hận” (Day of National Resentment) and “ngày tưởng niệm” (Day of Commemoration) for Vietnamese in the diaspora.
7. I thank Jody Blanco, whom I quote in this paragraph, for this point.
8. In 2000, a Gallup poll found that while 70 percent of Americans knew that the United States had lost the Vietnam War, nearly one in five believed incorrectly that U.S. troops had fought on the side of North Vietnam. Underscoring the generational disconnect, Americans over the age of thirty were more able than younger respondents to place the United States correctly on the side of South Vietnam; see www.sad17.k12.me.us/teachers/bburns/com/documents/ttc/gallup_poll_on_vietnam.htm (accessed October 25, 2005).
13. President George Bush first enunciated his vision of the “New World Order” in a speech before a joint session of Congress in September 1990, and then in a State of the Union address in January 1991.
22. U.S. military policies—search and destroy missions in the South, carpet bombing raids in the North, free-fire zones, and chemical defoliation—cost Vietnam at least three million lives; the maiming of countless bodies; the poisoning of its water, land, and air; the razing of its countryside; and the devastation of most of its infrastructure. Thirty years (1945–1975) of warfare destruction, coupled with another twenty years of postwar U.S. trade and aid economic embargo, shattered Vietnam’s economy and society, leaving the country among the poorest in the region and in the world and its people scattered to different parts of the globe.
35. Brinsfield, “Army Values and Ethics.”
44. Elizabeth Jensen, “Last Man Down,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2000, A1+. All quotes in this paragraph are from the Jensen article.
47. I thank Lisa Yoneyama for this point. In recent years, soldiers of color have also been held up as representatives of the nation. However, Colin Powell, for example, represented the nation “not because the United States was figured as black but because it was figured as open-minded, as multicultural, as pluralist”; McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 255.


64. Lisa Yoneyama, personal correspondence, January 25, 2005.

65. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East,” Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy United States Chamber of Commerce, November 6, 2003, Washington, D.C.

66. The Washington Post, New York Times, and San Diego Union-Tribune had no Vietnamese American writers. In contrast, about 30 to 40 percent of the articles in the Los Angeles Times, Orange County Register, and San Jose Mercury News were authored or coauthored by Vietnamese American writers.


68. Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the current government of Vietnam has categorically refused to incorporate South Vietnamese perspectives on the war or to provide any critical evaluation of the war, particularly regarding the violence committed by northern troops on the people of South Vietnam. See Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, “Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?” Amerasia Journal 31.2 (2005): 157–75.


71. Ibid., 172.

72. Quote in heading is from McCombs, “The Haunting,” F1.

73. Karnow, “Vietnam.”


75. Ibid., 19–26.


78. Curnutte, “Victories Follow a Lost War.”

79. Scott Gold and Mai Tran, “The Echo of War,” Los Angeles Times Magazine, April 30, 2000, 10+. The following quotes are taken from this article.


82. Quote in heading is from Scott Gold and Mai Tran, “Vietnam Refugees Finally Find Home,” Los Angeles Times, April 24, 2000, A1+.

85. Mai Tran, “Poll Finds Paradox among Vietnamese in Orange County,” Los Angeles Times, April 20, 2000, B5.
93. The White House, “President Bush Discusses Freedom.”
95. Sturken, Tangled Memories, 113; McAlister, Epic Encounters, ch. 6.
98. Leahy, “25 Years After Saigon.” The following quotes are taken from this article.
102. Sturken, Tangled Memories, 122.